On the Mind's Strand: A Study of Samuel Beckett's Embers

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett is, undoubtly, one of the most prominent playwrights of the twentieth century. He is most remembered for his use of language and his diverse techniques and themes. All of Beckett's characters suffer from the lack of communication with other human fellows. They are located in an utter state of hopelessness and despair. As a result, they suffer loneliness and loss. This state of loss is reflected in their inability to use language properly.

Beckett's experiment with loss and the meaningless of being is best reflected in his radio plays. Since the listener's only tie with the character is through sound effect, so the listener is forced to inter the character's mind and perception of the objects around him.

Thus, the present study is an exploration into the mind of the main character in Beckett's play, *Embers*, which takes the listeners and readers in a journey to collective unconscious of Henry, revealing its present state as determined by his conflicting past memories, where each memory tries to preside over the other, and each one forces the character to thrust backward and forward in time.

In the mid fifties and the early sixties of the twentieth century, a number of experimental playwrights sought to write plays for the radio, as a medium through which they could be free of visual commitments. One of those playwrights is Samuel Beckett. Beckett, in his radio plays, was looking for a new form through which he could express his view of life. Life for him consisted of endless amount of absurd elements and facts. He perceived the modern man as an absurd creature who is unable to take his role in the universe. Most important of all is his perception of language as a medium for communication. Language in Beckett's plays transforms its role as a means of communication to a rather fragmented and confusing medium that expresses nothing but nonsense. Through the radio, Beckett was at ease to represent characters as embodiments of certain images and themes, and he used voices as reflections of void and loss.

Beckett's radio play *Embers* (1959) is commonly regarded as one of his most complex plays. Hugh Kenner describes it as "Beckett's most difficult work."[(1)] Surprisingly enough, the play is neglected by critics because they could not locate the core of it; that is to say, its dramatic genius. *Embers* displays typical Beckettian themes as the absurdity of being and the void of living, nonetheless, it navigates into the delirious mind of the main character, Henry, to reflect the degree of despair that a human brain can reach.

Beckett decides to make *Embers* a radio play for specifically one reason: to establish a deep connection between the listener and the main character. Since the play is heard not seen, one will be obliged to concentrate on Henry's voice rather than physical objects. Hence, the listener is allowed an entrance into Henry's mind and memories. Marjorie Perloff describes the play as a " one man's world. The interplay between Henry and other characters takes place in Henry's mind."[(2)]

Consequently, the structure of the play is designed in such a way to define the diversity of Henry's voice, which controls the whole play. The structure's outline is made of a

long monologue that is interrupted by several imaginary dialogues that function as flashbacks. Those dialogues occur in the middle of the monologue to serve as a peak to the central action.(3) Henry's speech shifts in time, the past and present intermingles till all emerge as one.

The opening monologue shows Henry's fixation with both the sound of the sea , since Henry sits on the shore during the whole play, and the voice of his dead father. In the later monologue Henry is narrating the story of a man named Bolton and his doctor, Holloway. Throughout these monologues, Henry carries out fanciful dialogues with his deceased wife , Ada.

In his first sentences, Henry repetitively confirms that the sound he hears is of the sea: " That sound you hear is the sea. (*pause. Louder*) I say that sound you hear is the sea, we are sitting on the strand."(4) Henry, apparently, suffers from immense loneliness that drives him to the edge of madness. Thus, he often tries to link himself with the physical world by describing the elements of nature around him: " Listen to the light now, you always loved light, not long past noon and all the shore in the shadow and the sea out as far as the island." (Ibid.) Significantly, it is the sense of hearing that is emphasized throughout the play, so as to assure the fact that all the events take place inside Henry's head and thought. This fact is intensified by the image of the bare strand that Henry is sitting on. Henry's thoughts, like the naked strand, are void of anything but the memories of his loved ones. No matter how seriously he clings to reality, he keeps on sliding back into his dazed vision of his former life. Henceforth, one can suggest that the stage of the play is the mind of the character, and the more we proceed the more we probe deep into his memories and his collective unconscious.

Henry's real dilemma springs from the episode concerning his father's drown. Henry, reluctantly, accepts this theory, he rather thinks that it is just a lie: "We never found your body, you know, … they said there is nothing to prove you hadn't run away from us all and alive and well under a

false name…" (p. 683) His agony over his father's loss is shown through his imitation of the father's voice: (*Pause. Imitating father's voice*) " Are you coming for a dip?" "No." " Come on, come on." "No" (p. 684) It is worth noticing that the only voice Henry imitates is his father's, while other voices are echoes of his memory. This act demonstrates Henry's unrealized wish to be a replica of the father and to follow his suicidal steps. In fact, Henry's actual problem is that he is unable to follow his father. His father " whose posture on a rock above the sea provides the death motif. And the son who cannot respond properly to the loved father's request to 'be a brave boy', and to 'jump', is forever a 'washout'."[(5)]

The whole plot of the-father-son crisis is reflected in a story Henry heard once about a man called Bolton. Bolton is an aged man that suffers from unbearable pain, thus he calls for his doctor Holloway. Bolton implores Holloway to end his pain, he asks for a peaceful ending from the intolerable life. This story symbolizes Henry's wish to find a remedy for his miserable situation, this might be the reason for his sitting on the same strand where his father was supposedly drown. It seems that the sea becomes the only means of contact for Henry, since he lacks any social ones. Therefore, delving into the sea for Henry is to have a link with a real entity other than the phantoms of his mind. As for Beckett, the sea takes more than a physical dimension. It, in a way, becomes: "a setting which constantly reminds us of the unchanging succession of moments in the external universe, and in part because this monotony is given an audible dimension,"[(6)] as Stefan Grant states. One can also sense the affinity between the sea and Henry's disturbed mind. As the sea is raged with its ebb and flow, so is Henry's mind, which is disturbed by the haunting past that determines his life. Furthermore, one critic refers to the sea as the mother's womb that tries to engulf Henry's existence[(7)]. Here, we are drown back to one of Beckett's favorite themes which is man's desire to go back to his infantile state of being

Curiously, Henry's fanciful recollection of his wife, Ada, and his daughter, Addie, is the one thing that offers an escape from his loneliness and grotesque isolation. It is through the voice of his beloved wife that Henry tries to surmount the horrid and tempting sound of the sea:

Henry: Are you going to sit down beside me?

Ada: Yes. *(No sound as she sits)* Like that? (*pause*) Or do you prefer like that? (*pause*) You don't care. (*pause*) Chilly enough I imagine, I hope you put on your jaegers. (*pause*) Did you put on your jaegers, Henry?............

Henry: You wish me to laugh?

Ada: You laughed so charmingly once, I think that's what first attracted me to you.

(*Pause. He tries to laugh, fails*)

(Pp.685-86)

Ada's voice creates a barricade between Henry and the sea. Through engaging himself with phantoms from his past, Henry becomes once more the normal lover and father. Yet, sadly enough, the moment Ada's voice vanishes she ceases to exist. So the listener realizes that Ada is just another desperate creation of Henry's feeble mind.

The episode involving Henry's daughter, Addie, is less joyful. Henry remembers the day Addie was having a piano lesson, in which she is not doing really well:

Music master: (*Italian accent*) Santa Cecilia! (*Pause*)

Addie: Will I play my piece now please?

Music master: (*Violently)* Fa!

Addie: (*Tearfully)* What?

Music master: (*Violently)* Eff! Eff!

Addie: (*Tearfully)* Where?

Music master: (*Violently*) Qua! (*He thumps note*) Fa!

(687)

The question that one may ask at this point is : why does Henry choose this specific episode to recall from his

memories of his daughter? The answer may come quite naturally: as Addie lacks the creative touch in playing the notes, so is Henry who totally lacks any creativity to colour his life. Instead, he sinks into his hallucinations and fancies. Consequently, Addie can be seen as a duplication of Henry, both experience the same disappointment and confusion. Paul Lawley, thus, remarks:

The Addie 'hallucinations' are images created by Henry of his own situation. like Addie he cannot 'eff the ineffable' (a favourite Beckett joke here 'amplified to paroxysm'); he can only recruit memories or scenes which are available to him and press them into service by modifying and shaping them into images of the self in creation.[8]

Besides, Henry is still in dire need of having others around him, that is why he needs to fill the beach of people of his own creation. Thus, occurs the scene of Addie and the music master whose noisy notes breaks the monotony of the sea sound.

Ada feels furious at Henry's reaction to Addie's failing attempts with her music lessons, so she leaves the strand. Being lonely once more, Henry turns back to his unfinished story of Bolton: "I never finished it, I never finished any of them, I never finished anything, everything always went on forever." Holloway is about to give Bolton an injection that would ease his pain, yet, surprisingly; Bolton hesitates for a moment:" If you want a shot say so and let me get to hell out of here. *(pause)* we've had this before, Bolton, don't ask me to go through it again" (691).

Bolton's hesitation connotes Henry's own confusion about putting an end to his life. One critic calls the Bolton scene as "a paradigm of human suffering. "[9] Holloway is compared to Christ, who hoped to end mankind's suffering. In the light of this interpretation, Henry's painful hallucinations can be seen as pleas to find out an escape from the hell he lives in. Moreover, his inability to put an end to the Bolton-Holloway episode indicates the faltering aptitude of his mind. He halts at the climax of the story and turns away again to the meaningless utterances he used to repeat: " Words *(pause)* Saturday… nothing. Sunday… Sunday… nothing all day. *(pause)* All day all night nothing. *(pause)* Not a sound. (sea) " (692).

It seems that Henry is losing his power of imagination .This fact draws our attention to the play's symbolic title. Since the fire is a classical symbol for artistic creativity, hence the embers here stands for the waning creativity of Henry's mind. The creativity crisis pushes Henry to be one with Bolton. The emergence between him and the fictional character prevents him from finishing his story, because he does not know how to put an end to his misery. We realize that from the beginning Bolton was just a surrogate for the tortured Henry.

The reasons behind Henry's descending into a world of confusion are many. It maybe his loss of the wife and daughter. It maybe the loss of his father and the fear of following the father's suicidal steps. Above all it may be the loss of his mind's creativity which drives him mad. Consequently, one may ask an essential question: which of the previous factors has Beckett meant to be the motive behind Henry's hallucination?

Obviously, Beckett wanted to construct a character that is full of contradictions. Henry, the loving husband and father, is at the same time a cruel son who refuses to forgive his father's act of departure. On the other hand, Henry is a skillful narrator, nevertheless he is quiet unable to put a decisive end to his story. That is what is meant by "embers", the weakening inspiration of one's mind when one faces so many blows and disappointments in his life. As if Henry's mind has built a sheltering cocoon around his memories. This what Henry was doing during the entire play, locking his mind inside the one place he feels safe at, the strand. It is where his father supposedly committed suicide and, ironically; he and his wife made love for the first time. It is the sound of the sea, which seems to suck his identity, that prevails. This is symbolically indicated by the fact that the last thing we hear in the play is the sound of the sea.

The listener is left with the dim vision of Henry looking at the bottomless sea, reaching nowhere but sinking into desolation. The only reality is that: for Henry tomorrow will be the same as today. Tomorrow he will converse again with Ada and Addie who can be merely acoustic reflections for dad or daddy. As Perloff asserts " The silence of the sea below the surface, cannot comfort Henry who knows that sea is a grave – his father's."(10)

It can be said that *Embers* is a drama of consciousness. The whole play focus on Henry's recollections and construction of what was once his world. Henry's swinging from the memory of his father to his wife and daughter, then back to the father visualizes an obsessed mind that is locked within a specific chain of thoughts. As for his unfinished story, it is a mere reflection of Henry's inability to move on with his life.

Looking deeply into *Embers* will reveal that the play does not actually develop a well- constructed story, it rather dramatizes the protagonist's failing attempts to incarnate the shadows of his mind. His failure to do that leads him to weave a story that echoes his own confusion.

Beckett, once more, skillfully represents a character that is imprisoned within the limits and hopelessness of living. Henry can stand for the modern man who is unable to find a meaning or explanation of what goes around him. He may stand for the artist who loses his creative touch and who cannot finish a masterpiece. Nonetheless, he stands for all humanity that needs redemption and salvation, but instead it keeps spinning into an empty circle.

NOTES

1- Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, (London: John Calder, 1962), p.174.

2- Marjorie Perloff ," The Silence That Is Not Silence: Acoustic Art in Samuel Beckett's *Embers*". *http:// Samuel-Beckett.net/ch3 .html*. Retrieved February 6,2009. page 3 of 3o.

3- Stefan- Brook Grant, " Samuel Beckett's Radio Plays: Music of the Absurd". *http/ F:\embers paper\Samuel Beckett's Radio Plays* (music of the absurd) - Chapter 3. Retrieved December,12, 2008. Page 1 of 1.

4- Samuel Beckett, *Embers*, in *Twentieth Century Drama: England, Ireland, the United States*, edited by Ruby Cohn and Bernard Dukore, (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 682. All subsequent quotations are from the same edition and will appear parenthetically in my text, showing page numbers.

5- Perloff, p.7 of 30.

6- Grant, p. 1 of 1.

7- Paul Lawley, "*Embers*: An Interpretation". *http:// Samuel-Beckett.net/ch3.html*. Retrieved December 15, 2008. Page 3 of 39.

8- Ibid., p.3.

9- Ibid., p.7.

10- Perloff, p. 6 of 30.

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